

## Omer Calendar of Biblical Women

The counting of the Omer, which spans the forty-nine days from Passover to Shavuot, stems from the biblical commandment to set aside one sheaf of barley on each of forty-nine days between the two spring festivals, and then to offer the barley as a sacrifice on Shavuot. After the destruction of the Temple, the command became simply to count the days sequentially: Today is one day of the Omer, today is two days of the Omer... today is one week and one day, that is eight days of the Omer, and so forth.

Over time the Omer became a period of mourning because of tragedies that occurred during that time, including the death of many of the talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva's students. The Omer also represents the link between Passover and Shavuot— the wandering in the wilderness between freedom and revelation. The meaning of the Omer has changed, but the mystery of it is still fascinating. My own interest in the Omer began when I learned about it in college— why simply count numbers as a way to serve God? This Omer calendar of forty-nine biblical women is one way in which I have begun to answer that question.

Why associate particular women with days of the Omer? Jewish mystics imagined God as having multiple faces or attributes called *sefirot*, including *chesed* (love or expansiveness), *gevurah* (strength, severity, or judgment), *tiferet* (beauty, balance or compassion), and so forth. The mythic characters of the Bible represent these attributes— for example, Abraham represents *chesed*, while Rachel represents *malchut* (majesty, and the presence of the indwelling feminine face of God known as the Shekhinah).

Some Jews who studied the kabbalistic system, particularly Jews interested in *musar* or the refinement of moral character, saw the counting of the Omer as a way to meditate on seven of these *sefirot* and include them in one's own life.

The seven sefirot of the Omer are:

*Chesed*: love, lovingkindness, generosity or expansiveness. *Chesed* is the outpouring of love into the universe.

*Gevurah*: strength, rigor, severity, judgment or limitation. *Gevurah* represents discipline and boundary-making, but also indicates separation and struggle.

*Tiferet*: compassion, beauty, balance. The combination of *chesed* and *gevurah*, it represents the ability to mix expansive and limiting forces and achieve harmony.

*Netzach*: endurance, victory, or confidence. *Netzach* is an expansive force that survives, acts on the world, and gets things done.

*Hod*: glory, humility, yielding or receptivity. *Hod* opens itself to receive from the Divine, and shapes what is received with gratitude, openness, and humility.

*Yesod*: Connectivity, intimacy, or foundation. *Yesod* is the generative foundation of the universe, and represents connection, communication, and sexuality.

*Malkhut*: Royalty, majesty, dignity, dominion, or wholeness. *Malkhut* is the unity of all, and also represents the majesty of the Divine presence, the Shekhinah.

Each of the weeks of the Omer represents one of these seven attributes. More particularly, each day within a week represents a combination of that week's attribute with another one. For example, the first week of the Omer represents *chesed*. The first day is *chesed shebechesed* (love within love), while the second day is *gevurah shebechesed* (strength within love) and the third is *tiferet shebe'chesed* (compassion within love) and so forth. The eighth day begins the second week, the week of *gevurah*, and the first day of that week is *chesed shebegevurah*, love within strength. The cycle continues onward through the weeks until the last week, which represents *malchut*— the forty-third day of the Omer is *chesed shebemalchut*, the forty-fourth is *gevurah shebe'malchut*, and the final forty-ninth day is *malchut shebe'malchut*.

One way to refine in oneself the qualities of the *sefirot* is to meditate on an individual who has those qualities. The traditional kabbalistic system assigns male biblical characters to the *sefirot*, but not many female characters. Yet we are all made in the image of God, male and female. One modern understanding of spirituality is that each of us embodies the Divine in a unique way. Through understanding that God appears in many different faces, we can move beyond the idea that God is only one thing—only a father, only a king, only male— and come to understand that God moves through our world in multiple ways.

This calendar offers one biblical woman for each of the forty-nine days of the *omer*. It is meant both to teach about the women of the Bible and to honor the Shekhinah in every woman. My prayer is that this calendar will help women recognize God in themselves and help men recognize the feminine in their lives.

The Blessing over Counting the Omer:

Masculine:

*Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melekh ha'olam, asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetizvanu al sefirat ha'omer.*

Feminine:

*Beruchah at yah, eloheinu ruach haolam, asher kidshatnu bemitzvotaha vetizvatnu al sefirat ha'omer.*

Blessed are You, God, Ruler/Spirit of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us to count the Omer.

### **First Week: Chesed/Love**

1. *Chesed shebeChesed*  
Love within Love  
The Shekhinah

During the Exodus, the Shekhinah, the Divine presence, hovers near Israel “as an eagle bears its young upon its wings,” providing pillars of cloud and fire. The first day of the Omer is the second day of Passover, when the Israelites taste their freedom for the first time. Later, in the wilderness, the Shekhinah gives Israel manna to eat and water to drink, and appears on Mount Sinai to “suckle” them with Torah. Although the Israelites suffer greatly in the wilderness, Jeremiah imagines that God says of this time: as “the *chesed* of your youth, the love of your bridehood, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown” (Jer.).

Throughout history the Shekhinah is Israel’s defender and nurturer, hovering over them when they pray and accompanying them when they go into exile. She appears for them in the renewal of the new moon, in the study of Torah, in the peace of the Sabbath. In emulating the Shekhinah, we feed and clothe others and give of ourselves freely. , The Shekhinah is the essence of pure love and generosity, and it is proper to begin and end the counting of the Omer with her.

## 2. *Gevurah shebeChesed*

Strength within Love

Miriam (Exodus 2, 15:20-21, Num. 12, 20:1-13)

From the beginning, Miriam is an agent of love, but the love she must give requires strength and courage. She watches over her brother Moses on the shores of the Sea of Reeds, and dares to convince an Egyptian princess to love her brother enough to save him. Legend says that Miriam is a midwife to the Hebrews, and defies Pharaoh in order to save innocent male babies. As she leaves Egypt, she crosses the sea to freedom and shows her bravery by raising her voice in song even while the sea is crashing down. According to a midrash (interpretive legend), a well of water follows Miriam in the desert so that all may drink from it— showing that Miriam herself is a giver of life and strength.

Later in her life, Miriam's *chesed* is tempered by another aspect of *gevurah*: judgment and limitation. She criticizes Moses for not honoring her leadership of the people, and God punishes her with leprosy. She spends seven days and nights outside the camp, alone in the desert sun and chill darkness, until she is healed and readmitted. What does she learn about the relationship between love and severity during those days? Years later, Miriam dies in the wilderness, and her well disappears, but the mystics tell us that in every generation it returns to her people to heal them. When we imitate Miriam, we know that to love well we must love with courage and determination, and be willing to face all that our love brings to us.

## 3. *Tiferet shebeChesed*

Compassion within Love

The Attendant to Naaman's Wife (II Kings 5)

Some characters in the Bible pass so fleetingly that we almost miss them, like one young servant girl with a story appropriate to the week of Passover. In the book of Kings, during the long period when Israel is divided into two kingdoms and must constantly battle its adversaries, an Israelite girl is captured as a slave and made to serve the wife of an Aramean commander. The enemy commander, like Miriam generations before, is afflicted with leprosy. The Israelite girl, who is given no name, knows of the prophet Elisha, who can perform miracles. She says to her mistress: "I wish Master could come before the prophet in Samaria and be healed!" This stolen child has natural qualities of lovingkindness, and she shows compassion even for a man who has enslaved her and made war on her people.

The commander, Naaman, takes the little girl seriously and goes to the prophet Elisha, who orders him to bathe in the river. At first, Naaman refuses, but eventually he does what Elisha suggests and is cured. He also becomes a believer in the Israelite God. One can hope (although the text does not say so) that Naaman shows his gratitude by freeing his loving and compassionate slave. We can adopt Naaman's servant into our lives when we use our deep wellsprings of love to speak in compassion even to those who have hurt us.

4. *Netzach shebeChesed*  
Endurance within Love  
Yocheved (Exodus 2)

Moses' mother, Yocheved, loves her newborn son so much that she is willing to take extraordinary action to hide him. She keeps him in the house for three months, and when she can no longer endanger her family by hiding an infant, she weaves a basket and sets the baby boy afloat in the Nile. Yocheved's love is strengthened by *netzach*— by faith that she can overcome any obstacle. Her plan works— her daughter calls her to the riverbank, and an Egyptian princess hands Yocheved her baby and tells her to nurse the child until it is older, when it will be brought to the palace. Imagine the astonishment and triumph of that moment! This is *netzach shebechesed*— the ability of love to create extraordinary possibilities.

Yocheved's inventiveness and fearlessness as a slave brought freedom to her and her people. Her love created and nurtured what the prophet Micah calls "the three leaders of Israel."— Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Legend says that she lived to see the Exodus— her son Moses as redeemer, her daughter Miriam dancing by the sea. We are most like Yocheved when we act for the sake of love, when we move heaven and earth to give our love to others.

5. *Hod shebeChesed*  
Glory within Love  
The Mother in Solomon's Trial

Yocheved saves her child by giving him to the Pharaoh's daughter. Another biblical mother is faced with a similar dilemma.

King Solomon is known throughout the land for his justice and wisdom, but one case nearly stumps him. Two women, prostitutes, bring a case before him. One

woman tells him: "This woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. On the third day after I was delivered, this woman also gave birth to a child. We were alone and no stranger was in the house with us, just us two. During the night this woman lay on her child and it died. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from my side while I was sleeping, and laid him in her bosom, and she laid her dead son in my bosom. When I arose in the morning to nurse my son, there he was, dead, but when I examined him in the morning light, it was not the son that I had borne."

The other woman denies the whole story, saying that the living child is hers, and the two women begin to argue. Solomon orders a sword to be brought, and proclaims that his judgment is that both the dead child and the living one shall be divided with half of each child given to each mother.

One woman— it's not clear who— cries, "Give her the live child, and do not kill it!" The other woman callously insists, "The child shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it." Solomon declares that the live child shall be given to the woman who was willing to give it up, "for she is its mother."

*Hod*, glory, is sometimes explained as "yielding." The mother in this story of Solomon shows true *chesed* toward her child because she is willing to yield up her child so that it may live. We act in her spirit when we act in the true best interest of those we love, even when that is most difficult. The woman Solomon judges shows him the inner depths of *chesed*. In doing so she gives him a prophetic gift, a revelation of truth— appropriate to *hod*, which is the *sefirah* of prophecy.

#### 6. *Yesod shebeChesed*

Connectivity within Love

Serach bat Asher

Serach is mentioned in only a few genealogical lists as the daughter of Jacob's son Asher. Yet, because to the extreme rarity of finding a woman in a genealogical list, many legends were told about her. The most prominent of these was that she was granted eternal life because of her kindness to her grandfather Jacob. When the brothers of Joseph learned that Joseph was alive, they were afraid the news would kill their aging father. They asked the wise Serach to tell Jacob. Serach took a harp and sang the news to Jacob in rhyme while he was praying, thus awakening the spirit of God in him and allowing him

to absorb the news. Jacob exclaimed: “may the mouth that told me these words never taste death!” And so Serach, because of her *chesed*, lived forever.

Serach lived through the good times in Egypt and then went into slavery, working at the millstones. It was Serach who confirmed for the Israelites that Moses was their redeemer, by remembering and reciting the “code words” of promise and redemption that her father had taught her generations before. And it was Serach who, when it came time for the Exodus, showed Moses where to find Joseph’s bones, for the Israelites had promised to carry those bones out of Egypt when they were redeemed. Serach’s *chesed* showed itself through *yesod*—through connecting one generation to another, keeping links of hope and promise alive.

Serach bat Asher is particularly appropriate to the sixth day of the Omer because it is the seventh day of Passover, the day on which we celebrate the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Serach crossed the Sea of reeds, and there is a legend that thousands of years later in the time of the Talmud, she poked her head in the window of a study hall and told the Talmudic rabbis that the walls of the Sea looked like clear mirrors. Some say the Israelites saw in those mirrors all the generations of Israel, past and future. We are most like Serach when we show our love not only to one another but also to the generations who came before us and the ones who will come after us as well, by preserving memory and keeping stories alive.

### 7. *Malchut shebe’Chesed* Dominion within Love

#### The Shunnamite (II Kings 4:8-37)

The Shunammite (woman of the town of Shunem) is a wealthy married woman living in the time of the kings of the Israelite kingdoms. Like Naaman’s servant, she knows of the prophet Elisha, and she becomes his benefactor. She suggests to her husband that they build Elisha a chamber on their roof so that he has somewhere to stay— she does an act of *chesed* that allows Elisha to live with dignity. Elisha is grateful to her and asks her how he can help her, but her regal reply is: “I live among my own people.” I want for nothing, she implies. She represents *chesed shebemalkhut*— she does lovingkindness out of a sense of abundance and majesty.

Elisha knows that the Shunnamite has no child, and he prays for her to become pregnant, though the older woman begs, “Do not delude your servant” — she is too rooted in reality to depend on miracles. The child is born, and grows, but one day he is out in the field with his father and he develops sunstroke. He runs back to his mother, becomes ill, and dies on her lap.

Without a word to her husband, she commands a servant to saddle a donkey for her, and rides to the prophet. Elisha’s servant approaches her to ask her what is wrong, but she will not reply — she wants to speak only to the prophet himself. She bows before him, clasping his feet, yet she does not plead for her child. She only says: ‘Did I desire a child of my lord? Did I not say to you: “Don’t delude me?”’ She indirectly asks the prophet to take responsibility for the promise he made her. Elisha goes to the home of the Shunammite and lies face down upon the child “with his mouth on its mouth, his eyes on its eyes, his hands on its hands” until it revives. Without a word, the Shunammite bows, takes up her child, and departs.

The Shunammite has great *chesed*: she is kind to the prophet, cares for her son, and loves her husband enough not to distress him while she tries to save their child. Yet her *chesed* is always full of *malkhut*, of majesty: she never asks anything for herself, and her gratitude is dignified and calm. She relies on herself to help others, and when she needs help she is willing to search for it, knowing that she too deserves *chesed*. We are most like the Shunammite when we give and receive love gracefully, knowing that love is our birthright.

### **Gevurah/Strength or Judgment**

8. *Chesed shebe’gevurah*

Love within Strength

Eve (Chava) Genesis 2-4

The first limitation, the first judgment, that occurs in the Torah is on Adam and Eve. Eve is a new creature, dwelling in a perfect garden full of fruits of all kind, but she and her male partner have been limited in one way: they are forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Because Eve disobeys God and eats the forbidden fruit, she and Adam are punished with mortality and exile. Eve tastes the bitterness of death because of her own actions. Yet the fruit Eve picks also gives her wisdom and self-knowledge. In fact, all the humans that ever come to exist, come to exist because of Eve’s decision to disobey God. Out



of the *gevurah*, the judgment, that God decrees comes the *chesed*, the ongoing expansion of all the generations that descend from Adam and Eve.

Eve's life continues to hold limitations. She has to work hard for her living and suffers pain in childbirth. Her second-born son is murdered by her first-born son. Yet she does not give up the potential for love; she goes on to have another child, and she names him Seth (Shet), meaning foundation or gift. She is able to feel love and gratitude in spite of what she has suffered. Maybe she has a glimmer of all the love— and all the pain— that she has borne by beginning human history. *Chesed shebe'gevurah* is the knowledge that our lives are limited, finite vessels, but they are still full of love. *Chesed shebegevurah* is also the truth that, by limiting us, God has given us an extraordinary gift— sometimes there is blessing in the judgments we receive. We are most like Eve when we acknowledge the painful consequences of our choices and circumstances, and still remain open to the possibility of love, work, and wonder.

#### 9. *Gevurah shebeGevurah* Strength within Strength

##### Vashti (Esther 1)

Vashti is the queen of Persia. During a celebration, she and her husband throw separate feasts; he for the men, she for the women. The king's feast becomes drunk and rowdy, and culminates in the king ordering Vashti to come and dance before him and his guests. One legend says that he wants her to dance wearing only her royal crown!

Vashti refuses the king's request, saying that she will not come to his feast to dance. As a result, Vashti is deposed, and the stage is set for a Jewish girl named Esther to become queen and save her people. Vashti disappears from the story— whether because she is executed, exiled, or simply engulfed by the walls of the harem. The king then legislates that all women obey their husbands, afraid of the power of a wife who disagrees with her spouse.

But Vashti's "No" can't simply disappear, for Vashti demonstrates the true meaning of *gevurah*— strength, justice, and the willingness to impose limits. She is *gevurah's* essence— strength within strength, the inner will that allows us to make self-protective decisions even when they are unpopular. On Purim, some of us choose to celebrate not only Esther but Vashti as well, for her courage and daring. We are most like Vashti when we know when to say "no" to something

that hurts or degrades us or someone else, when we are willing to impose limits on ourselves and those around us in order to increase justice in the world.

10. *Tiferet shebeGevurah*  
Compassion within Strength

Deborah (Devorah) (Judges 4-5)

Deborah is the only woman judge to be mentioned in the book of Judges. *Gevurah* is her job— she sits under her palm tree and dispenses fair judgment to the tribes of Israel. Deborah is also a prophet and military leader who knows when the time has come to rise against the Philistines, who are oppressing the Israelites with their iron chariots. Deborah appoints Barak general and commands him to prepare for battle against the enemy general Sisera, and when he hedges, saying that he will not go to war unless Deborah goes with him, her answer is severe: “I will go with you, but there will be no glory (*tiferet*) for you in the path you are walking, for God will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” The *tiferet* will not be Barak’s— it will belong to Deborah and to Yael, the nomad woman who will aid Israel in victory by killing Sisera with a tent peg while he sleeps in her tent.

But Deborah embodies *tiferet* in another way. When she sings her song of triumph, she is implacable in her announcement of victory and her criticism of those who did not follow her to war. Yet she also tells the story of the mother of Sisera, who waits behind her window for her son to come home, though her son is dead and will not return. We might see Deborah’s song of Sisera’s mother as another instance of her judgment against the enemy, but it can also be viewed as an act of compassion to tell the story of the enemy’s heartbreak.

According to this reading, Deborah embodies *tiferet shebe’gevurah*— compassion even in the midst of judgment. She is a “mother of Israel,” as her song says— one who can show strength but also empathy. We can imagine that these two qualities made Deborah a gifted judge. We imitate Devorah when we judge others in a fair and balanced way, allowing ourselves to see their point of view in addition to our own.

11. *Netzach shebeGevurah*  
Enduring within Strength

Dinah (Genesis 30:21; 34)

Dinah, daughter of Jacob, Leah's last child and only girl, is named "judgment." Leah does not say why she picks this name, but the sages suggest that it is because she "passed judgment on herself" and prayed to God for a girl, so that her sister might have the opportunity to bear more sons. Dinah is born into a world of limitation, of *gevurah*, simply because she is a girl. When Dinah grows up, the severity of her world becomes even more apparent. She is raped by a local prince, and her brothers slaughter an entire town to avenge her rape. Or, some say, she finds a lover from a foreign tribe; her brothers call it a rape and kill her lover and his people to erase their shame. One ancient midrash even claims that Dinah is forced to give up the child she bears as a result of the rape (see Asnat, day 19).

Dinah lives in a world of *gevurah*. The Bible does not give her a voice to tell of her experience, nor does it tell us what becomes of her, as if the rape is the most important fact of her life. Yet Dinah has captured the imagination of modern storytellers. In Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, Dinah runs away and becomes a midwife in Egypt. In Deena Metzger's *What Dinah Thought*, Dinah speaks through the voice of a modern woman in search of her identity. Dinah's spirit has somehow survived. One book about modern Jewish women is titled "The Tribe of Dinah." Though Jacob gives Dinah no blessing and Moses gives her descendants no tribe, as Jewish women discover their own identities, they can acknowledge one another as Dinah's lost tribe. We ourselves can give Dinah a voice.

For this reason, Dinah is *netzach shebe'gevurah*— endurance within limitation. One ancient midrash about her says that she is just like her mother Leah: a *yatzanit*, one who goes out. The sages mean to criticize her for immodesty (regrettably, they are not above blaming her for her rape) but the verb *yatza* also means to go out, to make an exodus, to become free. We can imagine that Dinah found the strength and perseverance to go past her victimhood and become truly free. We are most like Dinah when we find a voice to speak of our tragedies— and then transcend them.

## 12. *Hod shebeGevurah* Glory within Strength

Yemima, Ketziah, and Keren-happuch/Job's daughters (Job)

The righteous Job is afflicted with troubles he cannot bear, including the loss of his seven sons and three daughters. He is a victim of *gevurah*— of arbitrary limitation and cruelty in the world. He cries out to God, demanding to know the reason for his suffering. While his friends berate him for faithlessness, he goes on crying out. Finally, God answers, telling Job only that God’s knowledge and might are too great for job to understand. Yet because of Job’s questioning, God rewards him with riches and health— as well as seven new sons and three new daughters.

The seven new sons do not have names, but the three new daughters do (this situation is unique in the Bible). They are called Yemima (Bright Day), Ketziah (Cassia Tree), and Keren-happuch (Horn [container] of Eyeshadow). “There could not be found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters in all the land” (Job. 42:15). Unlike other daughters in the Bible, who have no inheritance if they have brothers, Yemima, Ketziah, and Keren-happuch receive land from their father equally with their brothers.

There is something special about these girls— Job seems to value them and love them greatly. While surely they cannot replace Job’s children who died, they are a sign that new life is possible. Their beauty is not merely a physical beauty— it is the beauty of children who give hope to those who have suffered. Even within the severity of Job’s losses, the three sisters reveal the possibility of new beginnings. Their receiving the gift of land from their father is a sign of their receptivity to life, and it also allows them to be independent actors able to pursue their own destinies. They represent the openness and beauty of *hod* even within the limitations of *gevurah*.

This day of the Omer is Yom haShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, so it is appropriate to remember both victims of undeserved suffering and the new lives survivors have been able to build. Yemima, Ketziah, and Keren-happuch mark this day of mourning as well.

We are most like Yemima, Ketziah, and Keren-happuch when we are able to begin again after tragedy, accepting that we can grow and plant in spite of our brokenness.

13. *Yesod she beGevurah*  
Connectivity Within Strength

## She'ilah/Jephthah's daughter

The story of Jephthah's daughter is one of the most tragic of the Bible. A rash and foolish judge of Israel, eager to win a battle against his enemies, promises that he will sacrifice to God the first creature that comes from his doorway to greet him when he arrives home after the battle. But the one who greets him at his doorway is his daughter, dancing and playing the timbrel to celebrate his victory. "You have become my troubler!" Jephthah wails at her, failing to acknowledge that it is he, her father, who has become her troubler.

Jephthah does sacrifice his daughter. Yet before he does so, she extracts a promise from him that she may go to the hills for three months to mourn with her friends— and even after her sacrifice, her friends continue to gather for four days in the year to sing songs in memory of her.

The rabbis of the Talmud call Jephthah's daughter She'ilah (questioner) and depict her as a brilliant woman who makes many arguments as to why she should be saved, all to no avail. Yet even in the midst of the severity, the *gevurah*, of her fate, she is able to reach out to women in her life who love her— friends who understand the pain she feels and the hopes she must grapple with. She connects with these friends to such an extent that they establish a festival in her memory which lasts for generations. She'ilah represents *yesod shebe'gevurah*— she is a firm foundation even in spite of harsh judgment— not because she sacrifices herself, but because in spite of her own pain she is able to connect with others and create relationships that surpass the limitations of her own life. We can remember She'ilah in our own lives when we establish families and friendships that remain strong even in harsh times.

## 14. *Malchut shebeGevurah* Majesty within Strength

### Leah/Jacob's Wife (Genesis 29-32)

Leah is the elder of two daughters of Laban, an Aramean owner of flocks and herds. Her younger sister Rachel is more beautiful than she— Rachel is lovely of form and appearance, while Leah has soft, weak eyes. The young shepherd Jacob, sent by his mother Rebekah, (Laban's sister), to find a bride, falls in love with Rachel and serves seven years as payment for her hand. But on their

wedding night, Laban tricks Jacob and substitutes Leah, heavily veiled, as the bride. Jacob is outraged and demands Rachel as well, but the deed is done. Leah remains Jacob's wife.

Though the text tells us that Leah is unloved, she is not without resources. She is exceedingly fertile and bears many children. As she bears children she names them and expresses her feelings through the names. In some names Leah expresses her desire for love — for example, her first son is Reuven, “behold a son” — “The Lord has seen my affliction; now my husband will love me.” Yet as she grows older, though Jacob does not seem to warm toward her, she finds some contentment in her own life — her handmaid's second son is Asher, “contentment,” and she says of this name that “women will call me happy.” Although Leah is limited by her unhappy marriage, she becomes, in the words of a traditional midrash, “a master of praise,” who finds goodness in her life and does good for others. In the Zohar, Leah represents the “upper mother,” *Binah*, the divine womb from which life and understanding flow.

Although Rachel (see day 45) is the favored wife, it is Leah who is buried in the family tomb with the other matriarchs, Sarah and Rebekah. And although Rachel's children are more beloved by Jacob, it is Leah's descendants who become the kings of Judah, the priests of the Temple, and the ancestors of the messiah. Indeed, a midrash says of Leah, “she is called ‘elder’ (that is, greater) because she was greater than Rachel in her gifts: the kingship forever and the priesthood forever.” Leah fits the realm of *malkhut shebegevurah*, majesty within strength, because in spite of the painful reality of living with a jealous sister and a man who did not love her, Leah finds the dignity of praise and independence. Within herself she holds the gifts of royalty and priesthood. We are most like Leah when we are able to live not only for those we want to love us, but for ourselves and for the Divine.

## **Tiferet— Compassion, Balance, Beauty, Truth**

### 15. *Chesed shebeTiferet*

Love within Compassion

Shifrah and Puah

Shifrah and Puah are two hardworking midwives who help Hebrew slaves deliver babies in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh commands them to kill every

Hebrew baby boy they deliver, while letting the girls live. Shifrah and Puah do not obey the king's command. They show compassion to the Hebrew mothers and their children, and they do not kill the male babies. When Pharaoh summons the midwives again and demands to know why they have not carried out his order, they use his own prejudices against him. They claim: "The Hebrew women are like animals. Before the midwife can come to them, they give birth." Because of the compassion they show, God rewards them— "God built them houses." This may mean many children or prosperous families— one wonderful modern interpretation of this verse is that God made schools of midwifery for them so that they could pass on their heroic values!

Some traditional legends say that Shifrah and Puah are Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses. Other sources, both ancient and modern, imagine Shifrah and Puah as Egyptian women who believe in righteousness and who act to preserve the lives of others simply because it is the right thing to do. Shifrah and Puah demonstrate their love for life and show their compassion for the women whom they help to give birth, even at the risk of their lives. They are truly exemplars of *chesed shebe'tiferet*— they do acts of love born from compassion.

The day of *chesed shebe'tiferet* is also Rosh Chodesh, the new moon. The new moon is a symbol of rebirth— appropriate to two midwives who help to birth the Hebrew slaves into a free people.

#### 16. *Gevurah shebeTiferet*

Strength within Compassion

Idit/Lot's wife (Genesis 19)

In the book of Genesis, Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives with his wife in the city of Sodom. They have four daughters -- two are married and living with their husbands, and two still live at home. Lot has chosen Sodom as a place to live because it is rich and fertile, but Sodom is known for its evil ways. God decides to destroy Sodom, and sends two angels to save Lot and his family. Meanwhile, a mob gathers around Lot's house, threatening to sexually attack the angels, Lot's visitors. Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the mob as a substitute. The angels save the girls, and demand that Lot and his family leave the city immediately without looking back. Lot tries to convince his sons-in-law to come with him, but they refuse (he doesn't speak to his married daughters). As Lot, his wife, and his

two remaining daughters leave Sodom, Lot's wife looks back toward the burning city and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Why does Lot's wife turn to salt? One ancient interpretation suggests that she could not bear to leave her two married daughters to be destroyed in Sodom, so she looked back in order to see if they were following her. Her looking back was not an act of disobedience but of compassion. Rabbi Cynthia A. Culpepper in *The Women's Torah Commentary* adds that in the Bible, a pillar is often a memorial. By turning back, Lot's wife makes herself a memorial pillar to her two daughters who have died, and a witness of the past to her living daughters who have suffered at their father's hands. In fact, the midrashic name given to Lot's wife is Idit, which means witness.

Idit turns back in compassion and shares the suffering of her daughters in Sodom. Sometimes our compassion compels us to act even when acting will bring us into contact with suffering. We bring Idit into our lives when we have the courage, the *gevurah*, to involve ourselves deeply in the pain of others.

#### 17. *Tiferet shebeTiferet*

Compassion within Compassion

Hannah/Chanah (I Sam. 1-2)

The Talmud says that Hannah is the inventor of silent prayer. Hannah is barren, and although her husband loves her, her husband's second wife torments her because of her infertility. Hannah goes to the shrine where the tabernacle stands, as part of an annual pilgrimage, and silently prays for a son, promising that if she becomes pregnant with a son she will dedicate him to the Tabernacle so that he may serve God. The priest Eli, observing her, thinks she is a drunkard and scolds her. She protests that she is not drunk; she is a troubled woman who is speaking to God in her heart. Eli blesses her, and soon afterward she does give birth to a son, Samuel, whom she dedicates to the Tabernacle as soon as he is weaned. Every year from then on, Hannah makes a pilgrimage and brings Samuel a new coat that she has made.

Tiferet is the *sefirah* of the heart, and Hannah speaks to God in her heart, telling God of her heart's desire to have a child. When confronted by someone who does not value her prayer because it is not public, she defends herself, knowing that God hears even the most private of prayers. Because of the words that Hannah speaks in her heart, God has compassion upon her. It is appropriate that Hannah



represent *tiferet shebetiferet*, the essence of compassion. We embody Hannah when we acknowledge the true desires of our heart and express them, believing that our prayers are worthy of being answered.

#### 18. *Netzach shebeTiferet*

Endurance within Compassion

Widow of a Prophet (II Kings 4:1-7)

The prophet Elisha has numerous connections to women (see days 3 and 7). One Elisha story in the book of Kings tells of the widow of a certain "son of the prophets." According to rabbinic *midrash*, she is the wife of Obadiah, who saved the lives of many prophets of God when Jezebel, a foreign queen of Israel, sought to kill them. This widow comes to Elisha to tell him that a creditor is about to seize her children as slaves.

Elisha's first question to her is: "What do you have in the house?" She informs him that she has nothing but a jug of oil. He tells her to borrow many vessels from her neighbors, as many as she can get. Then she is to shut herself and her children in her home and pour the oil into these vessels until they are all filled. The widow does this, and miraculously, she has enough oil to fill all the vessels (this is clearly a precursor to the Chanukah story)! Taking the advice of the prophet, she sells the oil, pays her bills, and she and her children live on the rest of the money.

Obadiah's widow has compassion on her young children and goes to the prophet Elisha in order to save them. But he tells her that the miracle is in her own hands. She cannot save her children unless she is both willing to ask for help from her neighbors, and willing to keep pouring as long as there is an empty vessel. The miracle of compassion (*tiferet*) that is done for her is done as a result of her own perseverance, her own quality of *netzach*. We best imitate Obadiah's widow and her *sefirah* of *netzach shebetiferet* when we are willing to work to bring about miracles.

#### 19. *Hod shebeTiferet*

The Glory Within Compassion

Asnat

Asnat, the wife of Joseph, is the daughter of the Egyptian priest of On. She is the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh, who become two of Israel's tribes. Little is

said about her as a person, but her character has caught the imagination of many commentators throughout history. There is even an ancient novel called "Joseph and Asnat," telling their love story.

According to one *midrash*, Asnat is the daughter of Dinah (see day 11). She is conceived when Dinah is raped, and so Dinah's brothers want to kill the baby girl whom Dinah bears. Jacob, Dinah's father, puts an amulet around Asnat's neck that says "Holy to the Lord." Then the angel Gabriel comes and takes her to Egypt, and gives her to a childless couple -- Potiphar and his wife. Asnat grows up as a member of the Egyptian nobility. When Joseph is sold into slavery, he ends up in the very house where Asnat has been raised. In fact, when Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of rape, it is Asnat who defends Joseph before Potiphar, knowing he is innocent. In another *midrash*, while Egyptian women are throwing jewelry at Joseph in honor of his beauty, Asnat throws Joseph her amulet, and he recognizes her secret identity.

When Joseph becomes Pharaoh's second-in-command, he asks for Asnat as his wife. Later, when Joseph's family rejoins him, it is Asnat who asks Joseph to bring her two children, Ephraim and Manasseh, to be blessed by Jacob -- she is the originator of the ceremony we know today as "blessing of the children." Asnat also has two granddaughters, Ephraim's daughter She'erah and Manasseh's daughter Maacah (I Chron. 7:15 and 24) -- so we know that through Asnat, blessing comes to daughters as well.

Asnat is hidden in Potiphar's home to save her life, because although she was born from a cruel act, she is a pure soul. She is "holy to God." She is also hidden there so that Joseph will find someone to love, even in a land of strangers. Her destiny is shaped by the circumstances of her birth, but also by her willingness to be open to the stranger Joseph. Asnat is *hod shebetiferet* -- glory and beauty hidden in the heart. We are most like Asnat when we open to the secrets of our past and allow our truths to be revealed, so that we can receive blessing.

## 20. *Yesod shebeTiferet*

The Connectivity Within Compassion

Batya/Pharaoh's daughter

Exodus 2

The Egyptian Pharaoh who enslaves the Hebrews is the epitome of all that is arbitrarily cruel. Yet his daughter, while bathing in the Nile, chooses to save a

baby Hebrew that her own father has condemned. With the aid of the baby's sister Miriam, and the baby's mother Yocheved, who becomes the child's "wetnurse," Pharaoh's daughter takes the child she finds in a reed basket and raises him as a Egyptian prince. She names him Moses, "drawn out." Moses grows up, runs away after killing an overseer, dwells in Midian, and becomes a prophet. He returns to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Without Pharaoh's daughter, whom the Rabbis name Batya, "daughter of God" (see I Chron 4:18), there would be no exodus and no redemption. She throws off whatever preconceived ideas her father's bigotry has given her about Hebrews and raises one of them as her own son. She becomes part of a female conspiracy to save life.

*Yesod*, foundation, is the *sefirah* related to connection. Batya is able to reach across lines of class and nationality and show compassion for others. Batya represents *yesod shebetiferet*, the foundation of compassion, or the connectivity of the heart. The Exodus is built upon the compassion that she shows in spite of her father's decree. We can follow in Batya's footsteps by reaching out to those who are unlike us and connecting with them in a kind and caring way.

*Yesod shebetiferet* is also *Yom ha'Atzma'ut* -- Israeli Independence Day. Batya also symbolizes all those who took tremendous risks to establish a homeland for the Jewish people, and also those who work across national and religious lines to create peace and justice for all those who dwell in and around the land of Israel.

#### 21. *Malchut shebetiferet*

The Majesty within Compassion

The Witch of Endor (I Sam. 28)

King Saul's monarchy is collapsing. His once-loyal prophet, Samuel, tells him that God no longer wants him to be king. His rival, David, is gaining in power, and even Saul's own children support David as king of Israel. When Samuel dies, Saul faces war with Israel's enemies. Although Saul himself has banned witchcraft, he goes to a woman in Endor who is known as a medium, and asks her to raise Samuel from the dead. Saul hopes Samuel will give him comfort and advice.

The woman of Endor, though at first she protests that witchcraft is punishable by death, does raise Samuel from the dead, seeing him as a god-like man cloaked in

a robe. But Samuel's message is a cruel one -- the next day, Saul and his sons will die in battle. Saul sinks onto the ground, miserable, as Samuel disappears.

The witch speaks to Saul and encourages him to eat and lie down. He refuses to eat, but she kneads bread and slaughters meat for him, and at last he is willing to take some food. Though he will die soon, the woman of Endor encourages him to engage in the movements of life. She is one of the only people to show Saul compassion in the days before his death. An old woman whose profession is despised by the Israelite religion, she performs the work of midwiving Saul into death.

The witch of Endor, though she may be a controversial figure in an Omer calendar, can be said to represent *malkhut shebetiferet*. Through her compassion, *tiferet*, she gives Saul dignity, *malkhut*, on the last night of his life. *Malkhut* also represents the sum total of the world, and the witch of Endor is a reminder that we need compassion in every stage of our lives. We are most like the witch of Endor when we honor the transitions of life, both beginnings and endings.

#### **Fourth Week: Netzach/Endurance, Perseverance, Victory, Determination**

##### *22. Chesed shebeNetzach*

Love within Endurance

Rebekah (Genesis 24-28)

Rebekah, Abraham's great-niece, is going to the well to fetch water for her family when a stranger appears and asks her for water. Rebekah not only runs to quench the stranger's thirst, but offers to draw water for all of his camels as well! This is true *chesed shebe'netzach* -- Rebekah's extreme confidence and durability allows her to show extraordinary generosity and love to others.

What Rebekah doesn't know is that this strange man is Abraham's servant and that he will ask her to accompany him back to Canaan to marry Isaac. Rebekah agrees to this request quickly and fearlessly. According to *midrash*, when Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah, Rebekah re-institutes all the sacred household practices of Sarah -- candlelighting, bread-baking, and hospitality. This too is *chesed shebenetzach* -- by preserving the rituals and values that Sarah cared about, Rebekah does *chesed* to them and to the future Jewish people.

Rebekah has a tumultuous pregnancy. Her two sons, Jacob and Esau, are in constant conflict even in the womb. She asks God what to do, and God tells her that these two brothers will always fight, and that one day Esau will serve Jacob. Rebekah has a strong desire that her favorite son Jacob should triumph, although Esau is Isaac's favorite son. She tells Jacob to dress up as Esau in order to get Isaac's blessing. Then she sends him away to save him from Esau's anger, telling him to find a wife from among her relatives. It appears that she never sees him again.

Rebekah doesn't always seem to act with *chesed*. She lies to her husband and desperately disappoints her eldest son. Yet Rebekah has *chesed* for the future, for the eternity that is *netzach* -- she knows what must ultimately happen and acts to bring it about. There is a way in which everything Rebekah does is an act of love for a future she will never see. We are most like Rebekah when we run to do *chesed* for the unnamed stranger and for the unknown future.

### 23. *Gevurah shebeNetzach* Strength within Endurance

Tziporah (Exodus 2:16-22, 4:24-26, 18:1-12)

Tziporah is the daughter of Yitro, the Midianite priest who takes Moses in after he flees Egypt. Her name means "bird," and a *midrash* claims that she is quick as a bird. Moses marries Tziporah and becomes a shepherd. After Moses receives the vision of the burning bush, he returns to Egypt to free the Hebrews. Tziporah and Moses' two sons accompany him on this journey.

But something strange happens. At a night encampment in the wilderness, God attacks Moses and seeks to kill him. Tziporah acts quickly. She takes a flint, cuts off her son's foreskin (it's not clear which son) and throws it at Moses' feet, saying: "A bridegroom of blood are you to me!" God leaves Moses alone, and Tziporah adds: "a bridegroom of blood, because of the circumcision."

Why does Tziporah act in this way? Rabbinic legend says that God is angry with Moses for failing to circumcise his son, and communicates this to Tziporah by causing Moses' sexual organs to swell! So Tziporah circumcises her infant son, allowing him to become part of the Jewish people. Other modern readers imagine that Tziporah, the daughter of a priest, is offering the foreskin to God as a substitute sacrifice for Moses. My own interpretation is that, since God has just decreed to Moses the killing of the first-born Egyptians, Moses' own status as the

first-born of his adopted mother, an Egyptian princess, puts him in danger. Tziporah, neither Israelite nor Egyptian, uses the blood of the circumcision to create a transformed identity for Moses and his family.

Tziporah's instinct is to act to save the life of her husband and her children -- in this respect she represents *netzach*, the ability to endure. In order to endure, she must practice *gevurah*. She must call on her power to cut, to separate, and even to cause pain, in order to protect life. We are most like Tziporah when we endure discomfort in order to achieve a lasting purpose.

#### 24. *Tiferet shebeNetzach*

Compassion within Endurance

Hagar (Gen. 16, 21)

Hagar is the Egyptian maidservant of Sarai, the wife of Abram. When after many years Sarai cannot conceive, she gives Hagar to Abram as a concubine, hoping that she will be "built up" through the children Hagar will bear. Hagar easily conceives, and she thinks less of her mistress. Sarai, incensed by Hagar's behavior toward her, abuses Hagar until she runs away.

But an angel appears to Hagar and asks her: "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where are you coming from? Where are you going?" Hagar replies that she is running away from her mistress. The angel tells Hagar to return and endure Sarai's harsh treatment, promising that she shall bear a son and call him Ishmael (God hears), "for God has heard your suffering."

Hagar bears Ishmael and he grows up. But Sarai, who has been renamed Sarah by God, miraculously conceives in her old age and gives birth to a son, Isaac. After Isaac's weaning-feast, Sarah sees Ishmael playing and becomes angry. She demands that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled. Reluctantly, Abraham (who also has a new name) complies, because God tells him that he must do as Sarah says.

Hagar wanders in the desert, searching for water for herself and her son. Ishmael is close to death, and Hagar sits at a distance, unable to watch the death of her child. Another angel appears, and God tells Hagar that her son will become a great nation. God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water. She and Ishmael are saved. Ishmael grows up in the wilderness, becoming the father of many tribes.

Like many slaves and servants throughout history and throughout the world, Hagar must struggle simply to survive. Her mistress chooses a sexual partner for her, abuses her, and wants to co-opt her child as well. But God has given Hagar her own destiny. When Hagar suffers, God provides for her needs and promises her a great future. Hagar represents *tiferet shebenetzach*, the compassion within endurance, because Hagar's endurance and will allow her to discover God's angels of compassion. We are most like Hagar when we are able to open our eyes, even in the midst of our daily struggle to survive, and see the beauty and mercy God has left lying near us.

#### 25. *Netzach shebeNetzach*

Endurance within Endurance

Naamah/Noah's wife (Gen. 4:22; Gen. 6:9-9:17)

Not long after creation, God brings a great flood on the earth to destroy the wickedness of humankind. Only Noah and his family are saved. They must build an ark and endure many days of darkness while torrential waters cover the earth. Then, at last, the dry ground reappears. God sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign that God will never destroy the earth again.

Noah's wife is mentioned in the narrative but she is not given a name. The sages look at a genealogical list just before the story of the flood, in which a girl named Naamah is born to a woman named Tzilah, and claim that this Naamah is Noah's wife, and that she is a graceful dancer and musician. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, in a modern *midrash*, tells another story about Naamah. She writes that while Noah is saving pairs of animals by taking them aboard the ark, Naamah is collecting every seed and bulb so that the plants of the earth will also be saved from the flood.

Naamah goes with her husband and children into the ark. She endures while the world is destroyed and rebuilt around her. She preserves life and enters a new world to raise future generations. Perhaps she brings seeds; perhaps she brings instruments. Either way, she holds the tools of life. She is the *netzach* in *netzach*, the deepest urge to endure. We are most like Naamah when we endure through the storm, when we collect seeds and shape tools to create the future.

#### 26. *Hod shebeNetzach*

Glory within Endurance

## Nechushta (II Kings 24:8-17)

In ancient Israel, the position of the queen mother was an important political office. The queen mother advised the king, and some modern scholars believe she had a religious function as well. When the names of the kings of Judah and Israel are listed, the names of the queen mothers always appear as well. So it is not surprising that when one of the last of the kings of Judah, Yehoyachin, is exiled to Babylon, the Bible mentions that his mother, Nechushta, daughter of Elnatan, is exiled with him as well. Warriors, nobles, and craftspeople go with the royal family to Babylon, and the king of Judah is thrown into prison. But in the thirty-seventh year of exile, a new king of Babylon, Evil-merodach, releases Yehoyachin from prison.

We don't know anything about Nechushta but her name. Yet her name may tell us a lot. Nechushta, 'the bronze one,' reminds us of the bronze serpents Moses uses to heal the Israelites in the wilderness (Num. 21: 4-9). When the people are struck by a plague of biting serpents, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent (*nachash nechoshet*) and mount it on a staff. One who is bitten by a serpent can look at this bronze serpent and recover.

Nechushta, the queen mother of Israel, sees the looting of the temple and the reduction of her culture to a mass of exiles, victims, and stolen goods. Her capture is a symbol of Judah's defeat. Yet her name is a reminder of the healing that the Shekhinah, the Divine presence, can bring. A *midrash* about Nechushta claims that her doors were always open. Perhaps her doors remained open in exile so that like the bronze serpent, she could nourish and heal the other exiles. We know that in the end, Nechushta saw her son freed from prison -- not an end to exile, but at least a sign of hope for the future. Nechushta is *hod shebe'netzach*, the humility and grace we exhibit by enduring with hope. We are most like Nechushta when we find ways of nurturing trust and healing in a broken world.

### 27. *Yesod shebeNetzach*

The Connectivity within Endurance

## Adah and Tzilah (Gen. 4:17-26)

In the first days of creation, Cain is exiled for the murder of his brother. He can no longer live in one place, yet he founds a city and has many children. Five generations later, Lamech, Cain's descendant, marries two women, Adah and Tzilah. According to one *midrash*, Lamech asks to have sexual intercourse with



his wives, and they say: "The Flood [of Noah] is coming! If we listen to you, we will have children destined for the grave!" They do not want to be fertile, since they have heard that the world will soon be destroyed.

Lamech asks Adam to judge between him and his wives. Adam asks Adah and Tzilah to return to their husband, and the women reply: "Physician, heal your own limp!" Apparently, since the death of his son Abel, Adam has been living separately from Eve. So, Adam returns to Eve, and she gives birth to Seth, who will be the ancestor of Noah. Adah and Tzilah return to Lamech. Both have sons who invent the tools of civilization -- herding, iron tools, and musical instruments -- and Tzilah also gives birth to Naamah, whom *midrash* claims is Noah's wife (see day 25).

Part of human endurance is sexuality. Adah and Tzilah despair of the human potential to survive. What convinces them that humanity should continue is their awareness that others -- Adam and Eve -- will also choose to invest in children and in human survival. Adah and Tzilah create human connection by renewing their relationship with their partner Lamech. Because Adah and Tzilah make this commitment and help others to make it, the line of humanity can continue. *Yesod* is sexual connection, and one way we use *yesod*, sexuality, in the service of *netzach*, endurance, is by creating loving relationships and families. We are most like Adah and Tzilah when we take risks in order to make a future with those we love.

#### 28. *Malkhut shebeNetzach*

The Dominion within Endurance

Ritzpah/Saul's concubine (II Sam. 21:1-13)

While David is king over Israel, a famine comes to the land, and David inquires of God about it. God tells David that the land is being punished because the former king, Saul, put some Gibeonites to death. (The Gibeonites are not Israelites, but another tribe whom the Israelites had promised never to harm). David asks the Gibeonites what he can do to appease them, and the Gibeonites reply that they want to kill seven of Saul's male relatives, since Saul killed many of them. David spares the descendants of his friend Jonathan, Saul's son, and chooses the two sons of Ritzpah, a concubine of Saul, and five sons of Merav, Saul's elder daughter. He hands these men over to be impaled by the Gibeonites at the beginning of the barley harvest (that is, at the time of the counting of the Omer.)

Ritzpah, the mother of two of the dead men, spreads out sackcloth on a rock near the site of the executions. From the beginning of the barley harvest, she stays with the bodies and does not let birds of prey land on them to devour them. When David is told what Ritzpah has done, he gathers up the bones of Saul and Jonathan and the bones of the men who have been impaled, and buries them in Saul's ancestral tomb in the territory of Benjamin. After David buries the bones, the famine ends.

Ritzpah uses her quality of *netzach*, her endurance and determination, in the service of human and divine dignity (*malkhut*). She may only be a concubine, but she is made in God's image. She deserves to mourn in a proper manner, and her sons deserve the decency of burial. By protecting the bodies of her children, she forces the powers that be to pay attention to her cause. We are most like Ritzpah when we demonstrate the majesty of the human spirit by refusing to be treated as less than human, even when we face power far greater than our own.

## **Hod/Glory**

### 29. *Chesed shebe'Hod*

The Love within Glory

Hatzlelponit/Manoah's wife (Judges 13-14)

During the time of the Judges, there lives among the tribe of Dan a man named Manoah, and his wife, who is barren. His wife, although nameless in the Bible, is clearly the more potent religious personality. A *midrash*, drawing on a verse in the book of Chronicles (I Chron. 4:3), calls her Hatzlelponit. Hatzlelponit is in the fields when an angel appears to her and tells her that she will bear a son. This child must be dedicated as a *nazir* (one who, as a religious act, vows to renounce wine, leave his or her hair long, and stay away from dead bodies). His hair must never be cut. His mother must drink no wine during her pregnancy (clearly, an early attempt at prenatal health).

Hatzlelponit runs to tell her husband what has happened. Her husband, who seems to think her instructions are not good enough, prays to the angel to appear again and "tell what we shall do for the boy that is to be born. The angel does appear again -- but only to Hatzlelponit, while she meditates in the field. Again, the persistent woman runs to get her husband, but when Manoah finally huffs and puffs into the angel's presence, the angel tells him: "the woman must take care about all that I told her." When the angel disappears, Manoah is afraid that

he will die, but Hatzleponit tells him reasonably: "Had God desired to kill us... he would not have shown us all these things." The child Hatzleponit bears is Samson, who becomes a judge in Israel, and whose hair is kept long until his defeat at the hands of another woman, Delilah.

It is because Hatzleponit has the great gift of humility, acceptance and readiness (*hod*) that she is able to understand God's love (*chesed*) when she receives it. Her husband is full of *gevurah*, of rigor and severity -- he wants to know the rules, and he is afraid that God's presence will kill him. But Hatzleponit is comfortable with the appearance of angels. She knows that the prophecy she has received is one of love. We are most like Hatzleponit when we are able to take in the unexpected miracles of our lives with joy and gratitude, and without fear.

### 30. *Gevurah shebe'Hod*

The Strength within Glory

Sarah (Gen. 12-23)

The Bible does not record that Sarai receives a call from God to go forth into a new land, but she does go, with her husband Abram, to the land of Canaan. Both Abram and Sarai receive new names -- Abraham and Sarah -- and both receive a charge from God to found a people. Sarah becomes the mother of a nation, yet she faces many hardships. According to *midrash*, Sarah also has another name, Iscah, meaning "seer" -- because of the greatness of her prophetic spirit.

Sarah is very beautiful, and frequently in danger from foreign kings. Abraham calls her his sister to protect himself from men who might kill him to obtain Sarah. Twice Sarah is taken from her husband because of her beauty and placed in a royal harem, and twice she is freed after God afflicts her captors. In these stories, Sarah is the glory, the *hod*, in the harem, and she is guarded by God's *gevurah* -- the might and severity God exercises on her behalf.

Sarah is barren, and this is a trial to her. At first, she offers her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a substitute child-bearer. But when Hagar becomes pregnant, the jealousy between the two women becomes unbearable, and Sarah afflicts Hagar. Hagar's son Ishmael is born, but God continues to promise that the covenant with Abraham will only be fulfilled through the womb of Sarah.

Then three mysterious angels come to Sarah's tent and announce that she will become pregnant. She laughs at them, but she does indeed become pregnant, and

gives birth to a son whom she names Isaac, meaning "laughter." One legend says that Sarah's milk is so abundant, although she is ninety, that she is able to breastfeed the children of all the nobles in the land of Canaan.

As Isaac grows up, Sarah orders Hagar and Ishmael expelled -- perhaps because of jealousy, or perhaps because she foresees an inevitable clash between the two boys. Abraham protests, but God orders Abraham to obey Sarah's voice. The themes of *hod* -- the glory of Sarah's miraculous pregnancy, the prophetic covenant, the truth of her voice -- and of *gevurah* -- the afflictions, separations, and judgments that Sarah causes and experiences -- intertwine in Sarah's life.

Sarah's most difficult trial occurs when God orders Abraham to take her son Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him. In the biblical narrative Sarah has no role in this story, but many ancient and modern *midrashim* try to guess at her role. Norma Rosen in *Biblical Women Unbound* imagines Sarah hauling a ram up the mountain for Abraham to use as a substitute. One ancient *midrash* suggests that Sarah only hears of what happens afterward, and the shock is so great that her soul leaves her. As she dies, she cries out, and in her cry the sound of the High Holiday *shofar* is revealed for the first time.

Sarah's life is a wrestling match between the forces of *gevurah* and the power of *hod*, between the painful limitations of her life and the liberating prophecy she has received from God. She is both closed and open -- she collapses in despair but can also laugh in wonder. We invite the first matriarch Sarah into our lives when we are deeply immersed in grief and anger, or in delight and amazement -- when we have knowledge of our painful human limits, or glimpses of God's glory.

### 31. *Tiferet shebe'Hod*

The Compassion within Glory

Elisheva (Ex. 6:23)

Elisheva is the sister of Nachshon son of Aminadav -- the one who, according to legend jumps into the Sea of Reeds first! From the bible, we don't know anything else about her other than that she is the wife of Aaron. Elisheva and Aaron have four sons, one of whom succeeds Aaron as high priest. Elisheva becomes the mother of the priestly line -- all *kohanim*, all hereditary members of the Israelite priesthood, are descended from her. The Talmud notes that Elisheva has five

male relatives in powerful and prestigious positions -- and claims she has "more joy than all the daughters of Israel!"

But who was she as an individual? What merit does Elisheva have that makes her a mother of priests? One legend about Elisheva is that she was one of the brave midwives who saved Israelite children when Pharaoh ordered the Egyptians to kill them (see day 15). A modern *midrash* I wrote about Elisheva, based on this ancient legend, claims that Elisheva was a midwife who saved the life of a first-born mother who gave birth to a first-born son on the night of the tenth plague. Elisheva confronted the angel of death and asked God to spare innocent lives in spite of the Divine decree against the first-born. Because of her compassion, she merited the glory of the priesthood. So for me, Elisheva has become the symbol of *tiferet shebehod*, the compassion that resides in glory. We best exemplify the qualities of Elisheva when we seek to insert compassion into our ritual and spiritual lives.

### 32. *Netzach shebeHod*

#### The Endurance within Glory

#### Naomi (Ruth 1-4)

The book of Ruth begins with the story of a family in Bethlehem-- a husband and wife, Elimelekh and Naomi, and their two sons, Machlon and Chilion. When there is a famine in the land of Judah, the family leaves Bethlehem and goes to the foreign land of Moab. While they are in Moab, Elimelekh dies, leaving Naomi a widow. Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women-- Ruth and Orpah. Then they too die. Naomi hears that the famine in Judah is over, and makes the decision to return home.

Naomi's two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, have no sons. Naomi encourages the two young women to return home to their mothers, for she has no family stability or male protection to offer them. She asks Ruth and Orpah: "Do I have any more sons in my belly whom you might marry?" Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and returns home to her own family. But Ruth clings to Naomi, saying passionately: "Do not ask me to leave you or return for following you, for where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God." And so Naomi allows Ruth to follow her back to Bethlehem.

Naomi is very bitter about the loss of her husband and sons, and when she arrives in Bethlehem she demands to be renamed Mara, bitterness. She does not praise Ruth for her brave and loving choice, nor does she introduce Ruth to the people of Bethlehem. Naomi is unable to accept Ruth's love. Yet Ruth works tirelessly for Naomi, gleaning in the fields to bring Naomi food. Finally, Naomi rouses herself to help Ruth, creating a plan whereby Ruth can convince Naomi's wealthy kinsman Boaz to marry the young Moabite, who has behaved so gracefully in Boaz' field. In the end, Ruth brings the son she bears to Boaz home to Naomi, and the neighbor women say to Naomi: "He will renew your soul and sustain your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him, and she is better to you than seven sons."

Hod is the *sefirah* of acceptance, of receiving that which is good and beautiful. Naomi achieves *netzach*, her endurance and victory, because, even after so much has been taken from her, she is willing to accept Ruth's love. It is because Naomi can open her heart to receive the extraordinary gift of Ruth's devotion that, in the end, she can open her arms to receive her unexpected adoptive grandson. We welcome the qualities of Naomi into our lives when we learn to deeply receive the gifts we are given, and when we find victory and endurance through what we are willing to receive.

### 33. *Hod shebeHod*

The Glory within Glory

Chuldah (II Kings 22; II Chron. 34:14-28)

According to the Bible, the Israelite kingdoms that follow the rule of David and Solomon are plagued by godlessness. One righteous king of Judah, named Josiah, discovers that the high priest has discovered a sacred scroll in the Temple which teaches that God is angry because of the people's violations. But Josiah does not know if the scroll is authentically the word of God. Josiah asks a delegation of his royal officers to go to Chuldah, a prophetess who lives in Jerusalem, and find out from her whether he should govern according to the words of the mysterious scroll.

Chuldah, surrounded by the high ranks of the king's court, delivers her verdict: the scroll is authentic, and God plans to punish the people with exile because they have disobeyed God's word. But Josiah's lifetime will be peaceful, because he has humbled himself before God.

It is extraordinary that Chuldah, a woman, is not only a prophetess who is valued and respected by the king, but the first person in the Bible ever to canonize a text. The work Chuldah recognizes as God's word is probably Deuteronomy, the book of the Torah that promises exile in retaliation for the people's disloyalty. The rabbis of the Talmud ask why the king consults a woman when there are other great (male) prophets around, and concludes that it is because Chuldah is compassionate that the king asks her. Yet whatever the reason, it is clear that Chuldah begins a new kind of prophecy in Israel-- the process of reading and interpreting sacred text. Chuldah represents *hod shebe'hod*, receptivity within receptivity, prophecy within prophecy, for her prophecy allows Israel to experience the prophetic voice in a new way.

The thirty-third day of the Omer is also Lag B'Omer. Lag B'Omer is a minor holiday frequently celebrated with bonfires and with the cutting of the hair of young boys. Lag B'Omer marks a day when Rabbi Akiva's students stopped dying of plague, and celebrates the triumph of rabbinic Torah study. It also marks the *yahrtzeit* (death date) of Shimon bar Yochai, traditionally named as the author of the Zohar, a work of mysticism. It is appropriate that Chuldah be remembered on a day that is a celebration of prophecy.

#### 34. *Yesod shebe'Hod*

The Connectivity within Glory

Avigayil/Abigail (I Sam. 25)

The young David, running away from King Saul, is earning his living by intimidating local farmers into providing him with bribes in return for the safety of their livestock. One wealthy and obnoxious landowner, Naval (meaning "fool") refuses to pay. David sets out with his men to kill Naval. But Naval's wife, Avigayil, is wise and beautiful, and her servants advise her that David has been gracious to them. Avigayil sets out to meet David, bringing with her bread, wine, sheep, raisins, figs, and other rich foods.

When Avigayil meets David on the trail, she bows before him and delivers an eloquent speech asking David not to shed blood, for shedding blood will taint David's future kingdom. David, astonished, cries: "Blessed is the Eternal, God of Israel, who sent you to meet me this day! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you!" David accepts Avigayil's gift and does not harm Naval. The final twist to the story is that Naval hears of what has happened and dies of consternation, and David takes Avigayil as a wife.

*Hod* represents beauty, and Avigayil uses the beauty of her speech to conciliate David. But within Avigayil's beautiful words lies her deep ability to connect. Avigayil is able to use *yesod*, connection, to open David's heart to her. In the end, their connection is so great that they marry one another. And because she predicts David's kingship, Avigayil becomes one of the seven women mentioned by the Talmud as prophetesses. So it is appropriate that she symbolize *yesod shebehod*-- the connectivity of prophecy. We are most like Avigayil when we use the beauty of our gifts to connect deeply with others.

### 35. *Malkhut shebe' Hod*

The Dominion within Glory

Achsah (Joshua 15:13-19; Judges 1:10-15)

The Bible tells Achsah's story twice, perhaps because a good story bears repeating. Achsah is the daughter of Caleb, a leader of the tribe of Judah and one of the men who leads the conquest of the land of Canaan. When the Israelites leave the wilderness and enter the land, Joshua assigns Caleb part of the land of Judah. Caleb promises his daughter Achsah to the man who can conquer the city of Devir, also called Kiriath-sepher (city of the book!).

Caleb's cousin Othniel performs the assigned task, and Caleb gives Achsah to Othniel in marriage. As Achsah is leaving her father's home, she dismounts from her donkey and asks her father for a present-- a land with springs of water. So her father gives her the area of Upper and Lower Gulot (springs) as a wedding gift.

This rather traditional tale of the princess who marries a hero becomes more interesting when one realizes that in *midrash*, Caleb is the husband of Miriam, the prophetess associated with a miraculous well. While the ancient sages contrive to ignore the connection, it appears that Achsah is asking, not for territory, but for access to her mother's spiritual gift of abundant water.

Achsah, although she is given away like an object, finds a way to reclaim her sense of *malkhut*, of personhood and individual sovereignty. She does this by asking for a gift-- invoking the quality of *hod* or receptivity. Achsah asks springs of water from her father-- perhaps the physical springs of a new land, the spiritual waters of Miriam's well, or even, as one *midrash* suggests, the wellsprings of Torah. We are most like Achsah when we claim our own



personhood by asking for our own physical, intellectual, and spiritual inheritance.

### **Yesod (Connectivity), Intimacy, Generativity, Foundation**

#### 36. *Chesed shebe'Yesod*

The Love within Connectivity

Rachav (Joshua 2)

When the Israelites finish their wandering in the wilderness and begin to enter the land of Canaan, they prepare to invade the city of Jericho. Two spies (tradition identifies them as Joshua and Caleb) enter the city and lodge with a prostitute named Rachav who lives in the wall of Jericho. The king of Jericho hears that the spies have come, and orders Rachav to produce the two men. Instead, she hides them under stalks of flax on her roof, and tells the king's guards that the men have left the city at dusk. Under cover of night, Rachav lets the two men down the city wall by means of a red cord.

Rachav tells the two men that everyone in her city has heard about the miracles God has done for Israel, and everyone is afraid of the invading tribe. She says to the men: "I have shown you kindness (*chesed*); now you show me and my family kindness (*chesed*)." The men promise that if she keeps their mission secret, they will save her and her entire family-- all she has to do is display the red cord in her window. And when Joshua attacks the city and its walls fall, he spares Rachav and her family. In fact, one *midrash* (Ruth Rabbah 2:1) says that she saved two hundred families in addition to her own. The *midrash* even claims that Joshua marries Rachav, and together they found a prophetic dynasty that includes the prophetess Chuldah (see day 33).

Rachav is caught in a war between her city and a group of foreigners who need land and resources. She escapes this economy of scarcity by creating an economy of *chesed*-- she gives *chesed* to two Israelite men who are in her power, and in turn demands *chesed* from them. Rachav, a prostitute, deals in sexual connectivity (*yesod*) as a profession. She understands the power of connection, and uses a red cord to connect herself to a new people, so that she can save herself and the family she loves. And, according to *midrash*, Rachav even feels *chesed* for the man who destroys her city, enough to create new life with him (the Talmud records that Joshua had five daughters). We invite Rachav into our lives when we turn enemies into friends by doing acts of *chesed*.

### 37. *Gevurah shebe'Yesod*

#### The Strength within Connectivity

Tamar (II Sam. 13)

King David's eldest son Amnon has been lovesick for his half-sister Tamar and longing for her, but he knows he cannot have her because she is a virgin princess, protected from men. Amnon's slimy cousin Yonadav proposes a ruse: let Amnon pretend to be ill, and ask King David to send Tamar to make cakes for him in order to help him get well. Amnon pretends to be sick and asks David to send Tamar to him. David agrees to this odd request, and Tamar goes to Amnon's house. While Tamar is cooking for Amnon, he seizes her.

Tamar pleads with Amnon, arguing that his behavior is wrong, and claims (perhaps in desperation) that David would give Tamar to Amnon as a wife if Amnon would ask for her in a decent way. Amnon does not listen to her; instead, he rapes her. Then, disgusted by her presence, he throws her out, though she protests that "to send me away is worse than the first wrong you committed." Tamar cries loudly and tears her ornamented royal clothes. She goes to the home of her full brother Avshalom, who takes her in, and advises her to be silent. Two years later, Avshalom avenges his sister's rape by killing Amnon.

Unlike Dinah (see day 11), Tamar is very vocal on her own behalf. She argues her case before her brother, and even after he has brutalized her she continues to condemn his behavior. Tamar argues for the potency of sexual limits, reminding Amnon that Israelites should not commit incest or rape women by force. Tamar remains in her brother's house, separate from the world.

David's daughter Tamar represents *gevurah shebeyesod*, the limitations of sexual connection. She is a voice against violating the intimate boundaries of others. We are most like Tamar when we demand that our community never tolerate sexual violence and insist that all people, women and men, be free from sexual abuse.

### 38. *Tiferet shebe'Yesod*

#### The Compassion within Connectivity

Avishag (I Kings 1)

When King David is old, he is no longer able to have sex with women-- he lies in his bed and shivers. His servants suggest that a young woman be brought to warm his bed, and search for a beautiful girl. They find the "extraordinarily

beautiful" Avishag the Shunammite, and bring her to David. She serves the king, but they are not sexually intimate.

Many poems have been written about Avishag. She is a young woman appointed to be bedwarmer for an old and powerful man. No one seems to consult her about how she feels, though a number of Yiddish poems imagine her writing a melancholy letter to her mother, or promising the old, vain king that he still inspires fear in his subjects.

Yet the Bible points out that Avishag's task is not a sexual one. Avishag's experience is that of a caretaker to someone who is old and sick, who needs her help to experience human warmth. Many of us at one time or another will have to care for someone who is young, elderly, ill, or impaired-- to be intimate with their bodies and offer human connection to their souls. Like Avishag, caretakers are challenged to achieve *tiferet shebe'yesod*-- compassion embodied in intimacy. We experience Avishag's presence in our lives when we provide for the physical needs of others with compassion and gentleness.

### 39. *Netzach shebe'Yesod*

The Endurance within Connectivity

The Daughters of Tzelafchad (Num. 27:1-11; Num. 36; Jos. 17:3-6)

While the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness, Moses assigns the males of each tribe a portion of land in Canaan, which their family will inherit.

Tzelafchad, a man of the tribe of Manasseh, has died, leaving behind five daughters-- Machlah, Tirtzah, Choglah, Milcah, and Noa. These five brave women appear in front of Moses to ask for an inheritance of land in their father's name. "Let not our father's name be lost to his family just because he had no son!" they argue. Moses takes the matter before God, and God replies: "The daughters of Tzelafchad have spoken rightly-- give them an inheritance among their father's kinsmen." But there is a catch-- the daughters can only marry within their tribe, so that their land will not pass to sons who belong to a different clan.

From inside the biblical system, the daughters of Tzelafchad cannot argue for equality-- even after their case is heard, daughters will not inherit alongside their brothers. Only daughters without brothers will inherit. But what Machlah, Tirtzah, Choglah, Milcah, and Noa can and do achieve is an acknowledgement by the Israelite people that daughters have a strong connection to their family, to

their past, and to their land. That connection should not be discounted simply because they are women.

Rashi, the medieval commentator, connects these women to Joseph, saying: "Joseph loved the land, as it is written: 'Carry up my bones [to the land of Israel],' and his daughters also loved the land, as it is written: 'Give us an inheritance.'" The daughters of Tzelafchad are courageous enough to ask that God, Moses, and the community recognize the seriousness of their love and commitment. They are exemplars of *netzach shebeyesod*-- the victory that arises out of connection. We act according to the example of the daughters of Tzelafchad when we organize to speak up about injustice, when we sustain our family's traditions, and when we demand that others take our values and commitments seriously.

#### 40. *Hod shebe'Yesod*

The Glory within Connectivity

The Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10:1-12)

The Queen of Sheba is not an Israelite or even from a neighboring country. She comes from a far land in Africa to King Solomon's court because she has heard of the wisdom of Solomon son of David, and wants to test him with difficult questions. She arrives bringing camels, spices, gold, and jewels, and Solomon shows her his great edifices, the luxury of his court, the manners of his officials. She asks the king many questions, and there is nothing he does not know-- she is delighted by his wisdom. In some legends, she and Solomon become lovers. There is even a story that today's Ethiopian Jews are descended from Solomon's union with the Queen of Sheba.

But on a more mundane level, the Queen of Sheba is simply curious. She hears of something extraordinary she has not seen-- a truly wise king-- and she sets out to discover whether what she has heard is true. She brings gifts from her own land and exchanges them for the gifts that Solomon gives her -- "Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba all that she desired and asked for." Through this exchange she gains material wealth, intellectual wisdom -- and perhaps a friend. The Queen of Sheba represents *hod shebe'yesod*-- the receptivity that comes from deep connection. We are most like her when we are curious about the world, and when we have gratitude for the gifts we discover in everything around us.

#### 41. *Yesod shebe'Yesod*

The Connectivity within Connectivity

## Shulamit (Song of Songs 1-8)

The Song of Songs is a love poem full of lush language and snatches of narrative - a maiden in a garden longing for her shepherd lover, a man praising a woman with dark eyes like doves, a city where lovers are apart and yet together. Rabbi Akiva called the Song of Songs "the Holy of Holies" and believed it was an allegory of God and Israel. The woman of the Song of Songs, who is called a lily of the valley and a bright sun, is named once in the poem -- Shulamit. She may come from a place called Shulem, or perhaps her name is a reminder of her character -- peaceful, whole, complete.

Shulamit has brothers and city watchman who want her to remain indoors, but she goes out searching for the one she loves -- or at least she dreams that she does. "Let us go into the vineyards," she cries. "Let us see if the vine has flowered, if the blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are budding. There I will give my love to you." Her lover answers her in a similarly rich and eager tone. Unlike most of the Bible, where sexuality is subject to rules and harsh realities, the sensuality of the Song of Songs is free and gentle, based in loving relationship. It is not violent but playful, not hierarchical but poetic.

Shulamit teaches us about the power of deep intimacy -- sexual and spiritual, with humans and with nature. She is *yesod shebeyesod*, perfect connection. We welcome her into our gardens when we experience our intimate relationships as loving, equal, and fluid -- as part of the song of everything.

### 42. *Malchut shebe'Yesod*

The Majesty within Connectivity

## Tamar (Gen. 38)

The first Tamar mentioned in the Bible is the daughter-in-law of Judah, the son of Jacob. Judah, after his role in selling Joseph into Egypt, separates from his brothers and takes a Canaanite wife. He has three sons. When his eldest son is old enough, Judah finds him a wife-- Tamar. But Er is inexplicably displeasing to God, and he dies not long after the wedding. Tamar has no child, so the rule of levirate marriage applies. In levirate marriage, the brother of a deceased man marries the deceased man's childless widow, in order to provide his brother with substitute offspring and to provide a home for the widow. Judah marries his second son, Onan, to Tamar, but Onan spills his seed on the ground, not wanting to raise up heirs for his brother, and God causes Onan to die too.

Judah is now afraid of Tamar, and he tells her to go home to her family until the third son, Shelah, is grown up. Shelah grows up but Tamar is not given to him in marriage -- she remains a childless widow, bound to Judah's family, but in name only. Meanwhile, Judah's wife dies. Tamar veils herself and dresses as a prostitute. She goes out to sit by the city gate, and Judah gives her guarantees of payment in return for her services. Tamar becomes pregnant. When Judah finds out, he wants to have Tamar burned, but Tamar provides him with the guarantees he gave her. To his credit, Judah acknowledges his wrong, saying: "She is more righteous than I." Tamar gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerach, and Peretz becomes the ancestor of King David.

Tamar desires the deep relationship of mother to child. Placed in a desperate and lonely situation by her father-in-law's fear, she uses anonymity and sexual connection to force Judah to acknowledge his responsibility to her. Although it is a deceitful act, the connection Tamar forms with Judah restores fairness, gives Tamar a chance at a full life, and gives Judah an opportunity to repent. Tamar's connection brings dignity to herself, to Judah, and ultimately to the kingship of the Jewish people. She represents *malkhut shebe'yesod* -- the majesty that arises out of intimate connection. We open to Tamar's influence when we form relationships that bring lasting fullness to others and to ourselves.

### **Seventh Week: Malkhut (Majesty) , Dignity, Royalty, Divine Presence**

43. *Chesed shebeMalkhut*  
Love within Majesty

Ruth (Ruth 1-4)

Ruth, a Moabite woman, marries the son of Naomi, an Israelite woman who has come to live in Moab because of a famine in the land of Judah. When Naomi's sons and husband die, Naomi decides to go home to Bethlehem. She wants leave her daughters-in-law behind, thinking she has nothing to offer them. But Ruth refuses to return to her family. She pleads with Naomi to let Ruth come to Bethlehem with her, saying: "Where you go I will go." Naomi relents and the two walk on together toward Bethlehem, where they will be poor and without protection. Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi -- out of faith in Naomi's God or out of love for Naomi herself.

This act of extraordinary *chesed* from one woman to another is followed by many more acts of *chesed*. Ruth works hard in the field, gleaning the barley that the

harvesters have dropped, so that Naomi will have something to eat. While she is there, Boaz, a wealthy landowner and kinsman of Naomi, notices her and speaks kindly to her, offering her extra food and a place to rest. When Ruth asks why Boaz has shown her favor, he tells her that he admires her because he has heard of all the good things she has done for Naomi. Ruth tells Naomi what has happened, and Naomi conceives the plan that Ruth and Boaz should marry.

Naomi tells Ruth to dress in fine clothes and anoint herself, then lie down on the threshing floor where Boaz is sleeping. When Boaz awakes, Ruth asks him to act as a "redeeming kinsman," and perform a levirate marriage with her (see day 42). Boaz is stunned that this young woman wants to wed him, and tells her: "Your latest *chesed* is even greater than your first." Boaz arranges a meeting of the town elders and obtains permission to marry Ruth. The people bless Ruth, and in time she gives birth to a son, Oved, who (the end of the book is careful to tell us) is the grandfather of King David.

Ruth is a powerful force for *chesed*, first in her relationship with Naomi and later in her connection to Boaz. Boaz admires Ruth's *chesed* and Naomi's neighbor women comment on how deeply Ruth loves Naomi. The beginning of Ruth Rabbah, a midrashic work, tells us that the entire book of Ruth was written to show how great is the reward for doing acts of *chesed*. But Ruth's story has an even deeper message. *Malkhut* -- the Shekhinah, the dominion of God, the majesty of Israel, the last of the *sefirot* -- must be rooted in *chesed*. The story of King David and of the Messiah must begin with an act of kindness. Ruth is *chesed shebe' malkhut* -- the love inside the kingdom, the love that flows through the whole world. We are most like Ruth when we do *gemilut chasadim* -- acts of lovingkindness -- for the sake of increasing God's presence in the world.

The day of *chesed shebe' malkhut* begins the week prior to Shavuot. Ruth's story is traditionally read in synagogues on Shavuot because of her dedication to the Jewish people.

#### 44. *Gevurah shebeMalkhut* Strength within Majesty

Michal (I Sam. 18:20-29; I Sam. 19:8-17; II Sam. 3:12-16; II Sam. 6).

Michal is the daughter of King Saul, and the book of Samuel says of her that she loves David -- one of only three times in the Tanakh that women are said to love anyone. King Saul promises Michal to his rival David as a wife, thinking that his

daughter will help him keep an eye on David. Michal refuses her father's commands. Instead, Michal helps David escape her murderous father, using the clever ruse of putting a stone idol in David's bed, with goat hair on top. David runs off to the wilderness, and Saul forces Michal to marry another man.

When Saul dies and David becomes king, David demands Michal as part of the nation's peace settlement. Michal's husband Paltiel follows her, weeping. Michal says nothing, and she does not weep. She is nothing if not proud. And once she is in David's house, she remains proud. When David dances and whirls before the Ark as it is brought into Jerusalem, Michal despises him for what she regards as an obscene display. Michal mocks him, saying: "Didn't the king do himself honor today, exposing himself in the sight of his subjects' slavegirls?!" David shames her by reminding her of her father's defeat. The text records that to her dying day Michal had no children-- either because she was barren or because David refused to have sex with her.

The *midrash* about Michal is even sadder, positing that she died in childbirth, and/or that she adopted her sister Merav's five children, only to see them executed by David's order (see day 28). But there is something untouchable about Michal's pride. The Talmud records that she put on *tefillin*, and the sages did not stop her from doing so. She chose to perform a ritual normally denied women, and no one dared to tell her she should not.

Michal shows courage in defending her husband from her father, and later shows considerable strength in standing up to him when she does not like his behavior, though he is more powerful than she. She believes she is *gevurah shebe' malkhut* -- the strength of majesty -- or the limitation of power. We are most like her when we are willing to question the improper behavior of the powerful.

#### 45. *Tiferet shebeMalkhut*

Compassion within Majesty

Rachel (Gen. 29-32, Jer. 31:15-17)

Rachel is Jacob's beloved. Jacob serves his unscrupulous uncle Laban for seven years in order to be permitted to marry Rachel. Then Laban pulls a switch and disguises Rachel's older sister Leah as Rachel, leading her to Jacob's marriage bed. But Jacob is willing to serve Laban another seven years so he can have Rachel as well.



Leah is prolific and Rachel is barren. This causes Rachel great anguish. She pleads with her husband for children, but he angrily tells her that children come from God. She offers her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob so that Rachel can adopt the handmaid's children. Rachel even offers Leah a night with Jacob in return for mandrakes, an herbal remedy for infertility. Finally, after Leah has borne six children, God has compassion on Rachel. Rachel gives birth to a son, Joseph, who will be his father's favorite.

Rachel only gives birth to one more child. On the road near Bethlehem, in a heartrending scene, Rachel dies in childbirth with her son Benjamin. Later *midrash* imagines Joseph praying at her tomb. Many pilgrims today go to her tomb to ask for fertility. But Rachel is also known for her powers of intercession with God. In one legend told in Lamentations Rabbah, God is angry with the Israelites for worshipping other gods, and swears that they will never return from exile. All the patriarchs and prophets plead with God, but God refuses to listen. Finally, Rachel steps forward. She reminds God that when her sister Leah married Jacob and lay with him, Rachel herself hid under the bed, speaking in Rachel's voice, so that Leah would not be discovered and shamed. She overcame her jealousy for her real, flesh-and-blood sister. Should not God overcome any jealousy as well -- since the other gods Israel worships are not even real? Upon hearing this, God relents and promises to redeem the exiles.

According to the *kabbalah*, it is Rachel, who guards the Jews in exile, who represents *malkhut*, the *sefirah* of the Shekhinah. Rachel exemplifies the compassion of the Shekhinah for her people -- *tiferet shebemalkhut*. We are most like Rachel when we model in our own lives the way we want to see all people treated.

46. *Netzach shebeMalkhut*  
Endurance within Majesty

Yehosheva (II Kings 11)

Yehosheva has an infamous heritage: she is granddaughter of Jezebel, the queen of Israel who orders the prophets of God killed. She is also the daughter of Atalya. Atalya is a queen mother of Israel who, when her son the king dies, orders all the males of the royal house killed-- even her own grandsons-- so that she can assume the throne. Yet Yehosheva defies her mother and acts to save one of the king's sons. While Atalya reigns, Yehosheva hides away young Yoash and his nurse in a secret room in the Temple. Six years later, Yehosheva's husband,

the high priest Yehoyada, reveals Yoash to the Israelites. He anoints Yoash as king, and has Atalya executed. From a woman's point of view, the story is disturbing, as it depicts powerful women as conscienceless and unjust. But even we read the story as it stands, Yehosheva, a woman, takes center stage as a moral personality.

Yehosheva has a choice -- she can be loyal to her mother, and perhaps become queen herself, or she can act against her mother's callous and unethical acts. Yehosheva's decision to hide a threatened child and uphold his kingship shows that her commitment is to righteousness and not only to political power. Yehosheva represents the victory, *netzach*, of *malkhut*, God's sovereignty in the world. We are most like Yehosheva when we do not idealize our own power, but rather use our strength to increase God's power in the world.

47. Hod shebe'Malkhut  
Glory within Majesty

Esther (Esther 1-10)

Esther, a Jewish girl growing up in Persia with her uncle Mordechai, is chosen to enter the harem of King Achashverosh after he divorces his wife Vashti (see day 9). Esther is very beautiful, and the king makes her his new queen. But Esther, at her uncle's request, keeps her Jewish identity secret. Meanwhile, the king's evil advisor, Haman, has decided to exterminate the Jews, because he is angry that Mordechai will not bow down to him. The king agrees to Haman's decree of destruction, and Haman sets a date for his order to be carried out.

Mordechai goes to Esther and asks her to help. At first she refuses, saying that if she enters the king's throne room without being summoned, the king will kill her. But Mordechai says to her: "Who knows if it is for this that you have risen to royal estate?" Esther agrees to go in to the king and plead for her people's safety.

After numerous dramatic moments, polite conversations and courtly dinners, Esther is able to present her case before the king. "Let my life be granted me at my request," she pleads. The king grants Esther's petition, and orders Haman hung on the gallows he intended for Esther's uncle Mordechai. The Jews declare a holiday, Purim, complete with feasting and merrymaking, and Esther writes down the story in a scroll and sends it to all the Jews.

When Esther stands in the throne room before the king, she is wearing royal robes -- literally, she is wearing *malkhut*. Though Esther is not born a queen, she achieves dignity through her willingness to take dramatic action to save her people. She did not choose her position of power, but she accepts that her position must be used for the benefit of others. She is an exemplar of *hod shebe'malkhut* -- the acceptance that arises from royalty. We are most like her when we ask ourselves how we can use our own privilege to serve God and our fellow beings.

#### 48. *Yesod shebe'Malkhut*

##### Connectivity Within Majesty

Batsheva (II Sam. 11, I Kings 1-2)

Batsheva definitely begins her biblical sojourn as a sex object. King David, bored because he hasn't gone out to battle in a while, sees her bathing on a rooftop and demands that she be brought to him, even though she is married to one of David's officers. Batsheva complies, though it's not clear that she has a choice. When she finds herself pregnant, she sends a note to the king telling him so. David's solution is to invite Batsheva's husband Uriah home for a comfortable night in his wife's bed, but Uriah, a sturdy officer, refuses because his fighting men are still in the field. So David tells his general to put Uriah in the front lines where he will be killed. When Uriah dies in battle, David has Batsheva taken to the palace, and marries her.

Nathan the prophet chastises David and tells him that God will punish him for his crime against Uriah. When Batsheva's son is born, the child falls ill and then dies. David mourns for his son and attempts to comfort Batsheva, but Batsheva remains a mystery. Does she hate David? Love him? Does the death of her child devastate her? How does she feel about the murder of her husband? The answer to these questions is a mystery, answered only by legends and by the many paintings of Batsheva that hang in galleries of classical art.

What is clear is that Batsheva gets her political feet very quickly. She gives birth to another son, Solomon, and David promises that this son will be king. Somehow, Batsheva acquires Nathan as an ally. When David is old, Nathan and Batsheva concoct a two-pronged approach that will convince the king to anoint Solomon. Approaching David with her petition that her son be crowned, Batsheva speaks in the flowery language of the court. "May my lord king David live forever!" she says to the dying king. David anoints Solomon at Batsheva's

request. When David dies, Batsheva is the first woman to occupy the position of *gevirah*, queen mother -- a powerful rank in ancient Israel. She sits on a throne by her son Solomon, and even makes delicate political requests of him (see I Kings 2). One *midrash* holds that when Solomon sleeps late in the bed of his Egyptian wife on the morning the Temple is to be dedicated, it is Batsheva who comes to wake him up.

Batsheva finds herself in a tragic situation as a young woman, one that perhaps has very little to do with who she is as a person. Yet by the time she is old she has grown into a wise, mature, and regal personage who knows what she can accomplish. She begins as *yesod shebe' malkhut* in one sense -- she is the sexual and fertile woman who creates David's dynasty. But she also becomes *yesod shebemalkhut* in a different sense: the foundation of the kingdom, a wielder of regal eloquence and power. We are most like Batsheva when we age gracefully, using our power wisely and learning the lessons of our experience.

49. *Malkhut shebe' Malkhut*  
Majesty within Majesty

Shekhinah

As we began the Omer with the Shekhinah who is God's immanent presence on earth, so too we end with Her. In the *kabbalah*, *malkhut*, royalty or majesty, is the *sefirah* of the Shekhinah, who is called queen, princess, crown, and other royal names. The "Sabbath queen" whom Jews greet on Friday night in synagogues is the Shekhinah in her queenly aspect. Many kabbalistic and chasidic parables depict the Shekhinah as a queen or princess. These royal images are meant to convey both the Shekhinah's great power and her deep involvement in the welfare of those who dwell in Her world. The dignity conveyed by the *sefirah* of *malkhut* is the dignity of knowing that the Shekhinah dwells in us and that we are inseparable from Her.

There is also a dark side to *malkhut* -- it is the part of God closest to physical reality and therefore closest to death. The Shekhinah is said to share the human experience of pain and loss. When the Jews went into exile, she went with them. The messianic age will come to pass when Her exile ends and She is reunited with the transcendent Holy One.

The forty-ninth day of the Omer is the day before Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah. On Shavuot, the Shekhinah descends on Mount Sinai to

grant revelation to the people. It is written in the Talmud that on Shavuot, "God took out the breast to suckle Israel with Torah," and the first section of the Zohar teaches concerning the first night of Shavuot: "One who stays up all night to wait with the bride, the bride will not enter the wedding canopy except in their company." The God of Shavuot is a bride and a mother, and has many other faces as well -- God is in each one of the forty-nine days of the Omer. So it is appropriate on the day before Shavuot, the final day of the Omer, to meditate on God's feminine presence and prepare to greet Her.